

There's Been a Disaster and My Family Needs Food! What Do I Do Now?!

Central Missouri occasionally suffers power disruptions due to the weather. These disruptions may be short (one to four hours) or may go on for days. How long these disruptions last will impact how you husband your food supplies. In the case of a serious disaster such as an earthquake or the authorities have declared a pandemic emergency, you may not be able to obtain food supplies for awhile and will have to rely on what you have on hand.

YOU MUST START PLANNING NOW TO ENSURE YOU HAVE A PANTRY YOU CAN RELY ON IN AN EMERGENCY!!

The power is out, what should I do with the refrigerator and freezer?

Don't open your refrigerator or freezer unless you absolutely have to. Food in the refrigerator will stay safely cold (between 33° and 40° F) for four hours. A full freezer can keep food frozen for forty-eight hours, if half full, twenty-four hours. It is a good idea to purchase thermometers for your refrigerator and freezer.

During the winter you can store your food outside provided the temperature stays below 40° F. Food that was frozen can safely be refrozen as long as the food still has ice crystals and it's temperature didn't go higher than 40° F. During the summer, outside storage isn't an option. You can make your freezer last as long as possible by keeping it full. It is good practice to fill up the empty spaces with bags of ice or gel packs (this will also save you electricity, a freezer is most efficient when it is full).

The US Department of Agriculture recommends that all refrigerated food be discarded after four hours! Do not wait until the last minute to consume the food. Once the temperature in the refrigerator goes above 40° F you have to assume the food is no longer safe. Be prepared to consume all of the food once the refrigerator door is opened. What ever is not consumed you must throw away. Once the refrigerator is emptied, start consuming what's in the freezer. Open the doors just enough to quickly reach in and grab something. Try to consume all of the perishable food first before digging into the non-perishable food.

How am I supposed to cook perishable food without power?

Keep a bag of charcoal, a bottle of charcoal lighter, and matches on hand at all times. You can pick up for cheap a charcoal grill during an after Labor Day sale. If you own a gas grill, consider purchasing an additional propane tank so you always have a full one on hand. Pots and pans work just as well on a charcoal/gas grill as they do on a regular stovetop. Some of you may have camping stoves that run on fuel canisters or some type of liquid fuel. Keep enough of the fuel you need on hand to run your camping stoves for at least one week. Plastic

utensils are great but are lousy around an open fire. Make sure your kitchen has at least one metal spatula and spoon.

My family has eaten all of the perishable food. Now what?

Many people think that a family's stockpile of disaster food supplies looks like dehydrated food, surplus military rations, and canned goods missing the labels. You can go and spend big money on that sort of stuff but you don't have to. Stock what your family traditionally eats all the time, just stock more of it. Feeding your family red beans and rice when they are used to pasta and meat sauce will lead to open rebellion. Your family is already stressed out. Having a well-stocked pantry full of the food your family is accustomed to takes time to build but you can do it over time without breaking the bank.

Take advantage of the weekly grocery store sales and use those coupons! Purchase a couple of additional items for your disaster reserve on every grocery-shopping trip (always use a list). You will quickly plus up your pantry and do it at minimal cost. Remember to rotate the food. When you run out of something in the kitchen pull what you need from your disaster reserve. On your next shopping trip purchase what you pulled from your disaster reserve to replenish it.

Many of us won't be able to store the extra food in our kitchen cabinets. It is a good idea to store your disaster reserve in a plastic bin so you can take it with you just in case you have to leave.

How do I figure out what my disaster reserve needs to be?

So what is a disaster reserve? After the perishable food is exhausted, you want to keep a pantry that can keep your family fed for at least ten days. To figure out your reserve requirements take a hard look at your pantry and figure out how many days of food you already have on hand. If you have 4 days worth of food then your reserve requirement is 6 days.

Bear in mind that your calorie requirements may increase during a disaster (hard physical labor makes you hungry). You will also not be eating out. You have to plan for 2 to 3 meals a day per person. This sounds like a lot but you may already have 10 days worth of some foods already in your pantry.

OK, I need to stock more of what my family normally eats. What are some of the "really good to have on hand" food items?

Liquid evaporated milk (cans) or powdered milk (for the kids), canned or retort packaged meats (chicken, tuna), canned soup that doesn't need water added (with meat, vegetables, and rice/noodles), dried beans (if you are already in the habit of using dried beans), canned fruit and vegetables, pasta (if your kids have to have macaroni and cheese you need the milk

powder), vegetable oil, peanut butter and jelly, honey, catsup, hard candies (if you have kids you probably already have a ton of it from Halloween, Valentines Day, and Easter!), drink mixes (coffee, tea, bouillon, gatorade or kool-aid), crackers, and seasonings.